DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 471 311 FL 027 507

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TITLE	Evolution of a Revolution in Language Learning: A New Paradigm for the Mind Online.
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	6p.; Paper presented online at the Teaching in the Community Colleges Online Conference (1988).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Learning; *Computer Assisted Instruction; *Distance Education; Electronic Mail; *French; Higher Education; *Internet; *Language Proficiency; *Online Courses; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	Annenberg CPB Project; Coastline Community College CA

ABSTRACT

This paper describes two groups of students learning French online, one earning college credit through California's Coastline Community College and one studying for self-enrichment with the Annenberg/CPB Project and the University of Maryland University College. Students receive and are encouraged to explore weekly/semi-weekly current Web sites. They are also asked questions of current relevance (e.g., how they celebrate holidays and what they think of international affairs). One of the most successful features of learning French at Coastline Community College and the University of Maryland University College are electronic mail and live chats, both of which offer students ready, nearly continuous access to an instructor. Students are able to discover and construct their own knowledge rather than accepting facts transferred to them as unalterable truths by their professors. Learning becomes interdisciplinary as students learn that electronic communication is a medium, that French is a mode of communication, and that other subjects can offer the substance of the message. It appears that students demonstrate improved comprehension of written materials and improve fluency more quickly in online versus traditional French courses. In both courses, students of both sexes appear to succeed or fail in similar numbers. (SM)

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ED 471 311

EVOLUTION OF A REVOLUTION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING:

A NEW PARADIGM FOR THE MIND ONLINE

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(Presented online at the 1999 Teaching in the Community Colleges Online Conference: "Best Practices in Delivering, Supporting, And Managing Online Learning.")

Practices that can be defined as most effective in attracting, retaining, and yielding sound results among adult students learning French online are vibrantly current, student-centered, and authentic. Besides defining the currently popular "Learning Paradigm" as it has been proposed and presented by Boggs and Barr (1993, 1994, 1995), these practices define the kind of "interpersonal" relationship in the facilitation of learning" that was presented by Carl Rogers (1967,1990), in which the instructor creates an environment for engagement, facilitates and transmits information, and provokes a dialogical learning mode.

Two groups of students learning French online, one earning college credit through Coastline Community College's Distance Learning Department in Fountain Valley, California, and a second studying for self-enrichment with the Annenberg/CPB Project and the University of Maryland University College, take advantage of current materials. With the world around them in flux, these students receive weekly, and sometimes semi-weekly, new, current Websites they are encouraged to explore and use. If it is the season of Christmas and Chanukah, they are invited to participate in celebrations of those holidays as they might if they were living in a francophone land. If it is the week of Mardi Gras and Valentine's Day, they are invited to send cards to one another while they compare the tricentenary celebration of Louisiana's Mardi Gras to the provocative French origins of American Fat Tuesday. Weekly websites are archived, so that they remain in storage for students to consult when they wish; it is the students' prerogative to determine when their "learnable moment" might be.

As psychologist Carl Rogers proposed, and as Learning Paradigm theorists have cited as effective, online educators create an environment and design learning experiences, that are meaningful to students. Even if those students are learning a foreign language, and the environment they are given in which to learn is entirely foreign, it will have "semantic landmarks" such as a Valentine's Day wish or a Father Christmas, a dying King Hussein or a World Cup champion soccer team.

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Students are also asked questions of current relevance. How they celebrate holidays, what they think of international affairs, and their own likes, dislikes, attitudes, and proclivities are sounded out in an asynchronous bulletin-board-like threaded discussion forum.

The most "current", and the most successful, features of online learning of French at Coastline Community College and the University of Maryland University College are electronic mail and live chat, both of which offer students ready, nearly continuous, access to an instructor. Knowing they may receive an answer to a question of any kind within a day, or even a moment, of asking it improves students' comfort level and relaxes them, encouraging them in a very Rogersian way to take advantage of their "internal forces", rendering them willing to encounter, though it be in a virtual sense, their instructor and their fellows and, consequently, inciting them to explore on their own.

These methods of electronic communication, the asynchronous e-mail and the synchronous live chat, are also the most clearly student-centered features of the two French online courses. Clearly, the instructor with whom students communicate in either of these venues cannot possibly think of himself as a traditional, "instructionally paradigmatic" "sage on the stage." He must be cooperative, collaborative, and supportive, as typifies his role in the new Learning Paradigm. And like a Carl Rogers-style counselor, he accepts students as learners of something he can provide and as co-counselors of one another, and himself. With electronic writing style a kind of hermaphrodite, exhibiting features of the more careful letter-writing style and qualities of the casual parlance of daily colloquial speech, students improve fluency more quickly than they do in traditional, "Instructional Paradigm" classrooms where learning is linear and atomistic, with instructor-assigned exercises due on certain immutable dates. Since the electronic mode of communication is the medium and not the message of what students are transmitting via e-mail and live chat, the content of their messages is not necessarily constrained. They may use the electronic mode to ask about a new discovery of the relationship between AIDS in francophone countries and AIDS in African chimpanzees or they may use it to ask why French verbs have a past tense form that is used only in literature, never in speech.

Students discover and construct their own knowledge rather than accepting facts transferred to them as unalterable truths by their professors; their learning is thus qualitatively superior because they have had a hand in it, using whatever learning experience works for them and asking the kinds of questions they would likely never ask "in public" in class; they may find answers from one another or from scientifically or historically interesting sources, as well as from their instructors. Learning becomes for these students cross-disciplinary; they learn that electronic

communication is a medium, that French is a mode of communication, and that art or anthropology or Arab affairs might offer the substance of the message.

If Arab affairs suddenly become international affairs, if art thefts and anthropological digs are uncovered while students are discovering distinctions between imperfect and perfect forms of the past tense, online access to primary-source data can be made available within moments. Indeed, with time and space presenting no barriers, students today may have access to information that will not appear in the press until tomorrow. Their sources of information are not only current, but also authentic; images of ancient manuscripts and snapshots of winning soccer goals can be beamed from their sources to the students' machines. If that student wishes to explore Jordan or Jerusalem or Djibouti as if he were there, he can link himself to genuine resource materials.

If it is truly the case, as it has seemed to be, that adults have been succeeding in online French courses with these current, student-centered, authentic materials, then the nature of their success and the causes for it should provoke curiosity, if not further research.

It appears that adult students demonstrate comprehension of written materials and improve fluency more quickly in online French courses than in traditional classroom-based (TCB) courses. Students in online French courses tend to produce more writing and offer more questions and comments about their reading than do their TCB counterparts. Students in online courses also tend to use more verbs and try to experiment more frequently with complex and compound-complex sentences than do the TCB students.

Although much second-language teaching theory seems to be entranced by the notion of attempting to mimic first-language learning, the two processes are different, especially if the second-language learner is an adult. While children use "acquisition" strategies in learning their first language, depending upon intuition and a broad range of cues to tell them when a form or a structure "feels" correct, adults depend upon "learning" strategies, monitoring their speech and seeking logical patterns and forms. Online learning of foreign language may be successful just because it can tap into both acquisition and learning strategies. Online data are not isolated; a broad range of cues can help the learner understand. Likewise, French presented online will reveal patterns that may not be apparent from audiolingual or "Input Hypothesis" methods of teaching. Moreover, the very act of writing, whether it is typing quickly in a live chat conversation or sending electronic mail, is something that adults do better than children do and something that second-language learning adults have mastered, a logical, linear ordering of non-linear data.

With women entering the world of online activity at an increasingly rapid rate as computer access and World Wide Web user-friendliness democratize the Internet, and with French courses seemingly perennially populated by more women than men, it might be asked how women are succeeding in French online.

In both the Coastline and Annenberg/CPB-Maryland courses, students of both sexes appear to succeed and/or to fail in similar numbers. Perhaps because more women than men have enrolled in the Coastline course, their raw numbers of success are higher; in the Annenberg/CPB-Maryland course, however, nearly equal numbers of men and women have participated, and nearly equal numbers of them have succeeded. It is possible that the "feminine aura of French" has led women in the Coastline course to explore online study who would not otherwise have much recourse to computers; a number of them have no computers of their own, and some do not even know how to use electronic mail or chat rooms. It is the course content and not the mode of delivery that has attracted these people. Indeed, their urgent desire to use immediately the French they are studying has in some cases been enough to incite Coastline cyberphobes to learn how to use e-mail and live chat. By contrast, in the more cyberphilic Annenberg/CPB-Maryland group, men and women alike have cited technology as being a convenient and exciting attractant that has drawn them to French in Action Online.

Women who prefer to sit timidly in class, who are shy and embarrassed to speak or ask questions in class, who do not wish to be seen grimacing to produce the new sounds and structures of an alien tongue--these are the ones who appear to blossom online. Their fluency develops along with their cognitive proficiency in French, their ability to use their new language as a context-embedded system of the kind that characterizes natural, ordinary, face-to-face conversation in everyday life. These women are released from the tentative, context-reduced linguistic patterns that trammel most TCB courses and contexts.

This liberation from the limited language of school-oriented communication permits online students, both men and women, to profit from features of field dependence and field independence. Online learning can profit from field dependence to improve cognitive proficiency. That is, just as children do more readily than adults, and women tend to do more readily than men, online students ask questions revealing that they see foreign phonemes and morphemes embedded in a contextual field of language and culture. But unlike children who become so distracted with the field that they lose sight of the material in that field which is significant to their learning, adults studying French online seem to be able to discern particularly relevant items from a field of distracting ones, a field independence skill we all master with age.

The sophisticated cerebral structure of the adult foreign language student permits him to profit from his" language learning centers" in the left cerebral hemisphere to gather the specifics about language; the "left-hemisphere-oriented" adult treats his learning as a logical, analytical process. At the same time, however, the adult who studies his new language online will be able to incorporate visual imagery and even electronic auditory cues into the package of information he will face online. He will use the integrative skills of the "right-brain-oriented" type to render his language learning more complete, the kind of holistic experience that the new Learning Paradigm cites as being best able to elicit student discovery not simply of "teachable moments" but of "learnable" ones that will make his education endure.

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Publication Date: 1999

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